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WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF THE ACTS?

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Whatever interest one may have in knowing who the writer of any ancient work is, that interest is certainly enhanced when the book presents to us the *history* of an important period. All other things being equal, a contemporary of the times depicted, a participant in the scenes set forth, or one who is near enough to the principal actors in the events to get first-hand testimony gives us as a historian a surer guarantee of the trustworthiness of the record. It is an interest thus enhanced which insures for the problem of the authorship of the Acts ever recurring discussion. For years the question has been debated. It is not long ago that a large body of scholars abroad decided that the book came from the pen of a second-century writer and was far from trustworthy. In recent years the tide of opinion has been turning, and is now strongly setting toward a first-century authorship. The main reason for this is in our wider and truer knowledge of the Roman Empire and its relations to early Christianity. This better knowledge however, has not stopped all questioning as to authorship, and the inquiry is still in order, "Who wrote the Acts?" Briefly, we are to go over the way which leads to what we believe is a definite and correct answer to that question. Everyone who has carefully read the book knows that in 16:10 we come for the first time upon a "we" in the narrative: "And when he had seen the vision straightway *we* sought to go forth into Macedonia." Tracing the appearance of this "we" from this point on through the book, it is found recurring in the following sections: 16:11-17; 20:5-17; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16. These are the well-known "we-sections" and bear the indubitable marks of the accounts of an eyewitness. They are vivid in description, exact in their reference to localities, circumstantial in details, and conversant with peculiar habits and customs. They come from the pen of a companion of Paul. For a moment, leaving aside the question as to who this companion was, let us use

the sections themselves, to help us in our consideration of the rest of the book. If we have in these sections a real relic of the apostolic age, we have a point of vantage for studying the rest of the book in which they appear. They take very much the same position with reference to the remainder of the Acts that the Tübingen school once, in reference to the whole body of Pauline epistles, gave to Romans, I and II Corinthians, and Galatians which they regarded as alone genuine. They give a basis for comparison. If the hand which wrote the "we-sections" is manifest all through the book, it is but a just conclusion that the companion of Paul is in some way responsible for the whole. Much careful and painstaking work has been done to make evident the unity. The vocabulary and style of the sections have been subjected to minute criticism, as also the vocabulary and style of the rest of the book,¹ and the two have been compared.

Some of the results may here be given, though the full force of the study can be realized only as one goes with a student like Harnack step by step over the whole ground. There are ninety-seven verses in the "we-sections"—about one-tenth of the matter in the whole book. In these there are sixty-seven words² or phrases common to the "we-sections" and the rest of the book. These are for the most part characteristic words. Over against these has been set the large number of words which occur but once. Of these there are one hundred and eleven, but the force of the objection which these seem to substantiate disappears when one considers the subject-matter in which they appear. They are for the most part in the narratives of Paul's voyage and shipwreck.

In addition to the general correspondences in vocabulary, there is evident through the whole book the same general style, i. e., the same general structure of sentence and use of particles. Whoever, then, the author of the "we-sections" may have been, he is the author of the whole book in its present form. The theory which asserts that this author belonged to the second century and left the "we" standing in a document he was using in order to create the impression that he was a companion of Paul, is against all the stylistic phenomena of the sections themselves. There is, however, a wider

¹ See Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae*, 140-58; Harnack, *Luke the Physician*.

² See Harnack, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

unity of authorship than between the "we-sections" and the remainder of the Acts, and that is between the Book of Acts and the so-called Gospel of Luke. Here again, patient, exhaustive work has been done in the comparison of the vocabulary and style of the two works, and the evidence is as full and cogent for identity of authorship as between the "we-sections" and the other parts of the Acts. Such facts as these, "that Luke and the Acts have about two hundred words in common which are wanting in the other gospels;" that in the "we-sections" there are at least sixty-four words and phrases which are found in the Gospel of Luke and are wanting in Matthew, Mark, and John,³ and that similar characteristics mark both books, cannot easily be set aside. Even those who do not admit the Lukan authorship of the Acts acknowledge the identity of the writer of both books.⁴ It falls within the province of a later paper to discuss the trustworthiness of the Acts, but it is sufficient to say here that a clearer conception of the writer's method as a historian,⁵ and a truer knowledge of the situation of the church within the Roman world than we once possessed have done much to meet the objections which have been brought against the possibility of authorship by a companion of Paul.

Up to this point we have used the general phrase "a companion of Paul." We are now ready for the more specific question, "who was this companion" who wrote the "we-sections" and the rest of the book? Among those who were with the apostle only four can be thought of as possible claimants, and each has had defenders. They are Timothy, Silas, Titus, and Luke. A word about each of the first three will suffice.

Timothy is shut out by the way in which his name stands related to the "we" in 20:5, 6. He was among those who "had gone before and were waiting for *us* at Troas." The same objection holds against Silas (see 15:22). Furthermore, he was, as far as the record goes, not with Paul in the third missionary journey. Titus is not once mentioned in the whole book, and this has led to the supposition that he was the author of it. Why, then, did early tradition so persistently attribute the work to Luke? He and Titus cannot be the

³ See Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 103, 78.

⁴ See Davidson, *Introduction*, Vol. II, p. 145; McGiffert, *Apostolic Age*, p. 433.

⁵ See Ramsay, *St. Paul*, chap. i.

same, for II Tim. 4:10 carefully distinguishes them. "Titus is gone to Dalmatia; only Luke is with me." It is more likely that the name of Titus is not found in the book because he was a relative of Luke.

By a process of exclusion we thus come to the name of Luke, and the following evidence tends to the support of his claim.

1. *The testimony of tradition.*—The Muratorian Canon (170–80 A. D.), the earliest document containing a list of the books of the New Testament, ascribes both the Acts and the Third Gospel to Luke. From all parts of the church at the close of the second century this witness was seconded. Irenaeus, who speaks for Asia Minor, Rome, and Gaul, Clement of Alexandria, for Egypt, and Tertullian, for the African church, all consider Luke the author. Indeed, it may be said that until the close of the ninth century this was the general opinion. Whatever may be the value of all this testimony viewed by itself, it certainly strongly corroborates a judgment in Luke's favor gained from the study of internal evidence. Nor can we make it well apply to some unknown Luke on the ground that Luke was a common name.⁶ The Muratorian Canon speaks of the Luke who was a physician, taking its description probably from Col. 4:14, and this leads us to the second support of Luke's claim, viz:

2. *The medical phraseology* of both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts. As this has an important bearing upon the whole matter it is worthy of a few moments' consideration. The subject is fully treated in Hobart's well-known book, *The Medical Language of St. Luke*. Now it is not simply in the use of medical terms, nor in the presentation of cases of healing that the surest evidence for the pen of a physician is found in these narratives, but rather, it is in the way in which medical terms are used. The accounts show medical insight and a familiarity with the physician's point of view. A few instances will illustrate. In Acts 28:8 he speaks of the "feverish symptoms" and the "bloody flux" afflicting the father of Publius (Acts 28:8). In the case of the cripple in the Temple he uses the technical word *βάσεις* instead of *πόδες*. He describes Peter's condition in 10:10 as an *ἐκστασις*. The girl at Philippi is not possessed of a demon, the ordinary way of describing such cases, but she has "a spirit of Python,"

⁶ See McGiffert, *Apostolic Age*, p. 433.

i. e., she exhibited symptoms like the "convulsive movements and wild cries of the Pythian priestess at Delphi" (Acts 16:16).

These are but a few of the instances that reveal the diagnosis of a physician. And the accounts in which they occur are in their whole general character confirmative of this. It is interesting to note how parallel accounts in Mark have their descriptions varied by the introduction in Luke of the more exact medical terms. So familiar is he with the language of medicine that it colors his diction when matters not specifically medical are concerned. He is at home in this field of service. His training as a physician also helps to explain the excellent quality of his work as a historian. He was a man of education; the mental discipline which had fitted him for his profession gave him the grasp and discernment shown in his method. As he saw where he could improve upon the various attempts which had been made to frame a gospel, so he saw how he could best set forth the development of the church in its progress from Jerusalem to Rome. And this all helps us to see how he was able to give us what constitutes a third support of his claim.

3. *His portrait of Paul.*—However deep his interest in the earlier history of the missionary movements in the church, the author finds his hero in Paul. There was that in the great apostle which fastened his attention and quickened his affection. He lets us see this devoted preacher and teacher in all the strength and breadth of his personality. It is no general indefinite picture which he gives of him. It is a veritable portrait, sufficiently detailed and individualized to reveal close personal acquaintance, and yet so presented as to make clear how well he understood the spirit of the man. It is the Paul of the epistles, many-sided, quick in sympathy, strong in purpose, adaptable, and unwearying in zeal. It is no idle surmise which sees in the relationship of Luke to Paul not only that of friendship, but of a friendship deepened and made tender by that watchful and helpful care which a physician can give. A man's relation to his doctor becomes especially intimate when, under such circumstances as Paul and Luke were together, the one is in need of wise medical care, and the other finds it his highest joy to give it. And it is no forced reflection of that intimacy which shows us in some of the later Pauline epistles figures of speech which Paul himself adopted from a physician's vocabulary.

Certain it is that no second-century writer could have given us the portrait of Paul found in the Acts. As has been truthfully said,

No one has yet been able to draw a convincing portrait of St. Paul from his epistles alone. All attempts in this direction have led to productions which true historians have ignored. For these the portrait given in the Acts of the Apostles has always remained a concurring factor, because the abundance of actual fact which is therein afforded still makes it possible to pass behind the external action to the inward motive.

Considerations like these—lines of testimony so positive—converge upon Luke as the one who meets most clearly the demands of the authorship of this history. A companion of Paul, a physician, and one who has given us a living portrait—who can this be but the one whom tradition has declared him to be—Luke “the beloved physician?”

Apart from what Acts makes known to us, we have but scanty notices of the author's life. Tradition makes him a native of Antioch, but this is very doubtful. Eusebius says that he was “according to birth of those from Antioch,”⁷ which probably means no more than that his family was in some way connected with Antioch. A much more likely supposition as to his birthplace is that which makes him a native of Philippi. In Acts 16:12 he seems to be quietly upholding it as against the rival cities of Thessalonica and Amphipolis, and it is at Philippi that he abides when Paul and Silas go to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1; 20:4-5). He may have been “the man of Macedonia” calling Paul to go on over to that land. His name appears only in three places in the New Testament, Col. 4:14, Phil., vs. 24, and II Tim. 4:11. In the first of these he is so introduced as to separate him from “those of the circumcision,” and he was therefore a Gentile. His profession and general attitude toward Christianity confirm this. In Philemon he is called Paul's fellow-worker, and whatever his value to Paul as a physician, he undoubtedly endeared himself to the heart of the apostle by his earnest sympathy and co-operation in the arduous work of the missionary journeys. While carrying on this work he used his time to gather material for the instruction of Theophilus, and his own testimony to his carefulness—“by investigation I have kept abreast of the latest information” (Luke 1:3)—is estab-

⁷ *Hist. Eccles.*, III, 4.

lished by a critical study of the books he has given us. It does not fall within the bounds of this paper to discuss the sources he used or the method he has chosen. It is sufficient to say that he has used them with that skill and insight which his experience and training made possible. Theophilus is no fiction of the imagination. He was probably a Gentile of noble rank who earnestly desired to know with some fulness the historic foundations of his faith. The satisfaction of his desire has been the enrichment of the church in all ages through a gospel and a history. Outside of the three passages to which we have above referred, such further knowledge of our author as the New Testament gives, may be found in the "we-sections." As with the names of all the other leading figures in the New Testament story, tradition has been busy with the story of Luke. He is said to have been a painter of no mean ability. Whether this be so or not it is true that art has found continual inspiration in his gospel and in scenes from the Acts. We are told that he had neither wife nor children. He died, according to one account, peacefully in his old age; according to another, a martyr's death. It is enough for us to know that he served faithfully and helpfully with Paul, and gave to us an invaluable portion of our New Testament.